

## Reading: Build In Plans To Support People

### Supportive Actions

Listed below are supportive actions that change leaders should take.

- **Acknowledge, Honor, and Balance Losses** — Leaders help people avoid getting stuck in mourning their losses by recognizing the losses and showing respect. Anything that can be done to compensate them for the losses will energize people to move forward.
- **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate** — During change, leaders often feel too uncertain and busy themselves to communicate with others, yet that is exactly what is needed the most during change. Change experts note that most leaders drastically underestimate the amount of communication needed to implement change effectively.

In his book Leading Change, John Kotter observes that in cases where change initiatives fail, one of the main causes is that leaders “undercommunicate the vision by a factor of 10, or 100, or even 1,000.”

William Bridges also notes that most leaders under-communicate about change. He compares the process to a large-scale marathon. The leaders of the race cross the finish line and move on to other activities, while most of the other runners are still trying to make it to the next mile.

- **Demonstrate Compassion and Patience** — Many leaders mistakenly believe it is better to ignore and discourage emotional reactions to change. By dealing compassionately with emotional reactions, leaders can go a long way toward helping people work through their concerns and move forward.

### Mitigating Impact

There are several ways to ease the impact of change on people.

- **Give staff members some control over something.** If they have not been part of decisions about what their jobs will be, give them control over deciding how the jobs will be done.

One of the most effective channels for this energy is in the creation of temporary structures. While leaders are focused on reaching the long-term vision, they may unintentionally neglect the need for temporary structures. Those affected by the change see the greatest need to restore order, and can set up structures that will give them a sense of control. Leaders need to stay involved in this process, both to appreciate the effort and to ensure that people do not attempt to move backward.

- **Offer special roles.** Ask individuals what roles they would like to play to help make the change work. They may want to write newsletters, develop new manuals, or work with customers and stakeholders to be sure they understand the change. Often they can help you communicate more thoroughly, while they are getting a new sense of purpose. Be sure to provide the information and support they need to play the roles they elect.
- **Recognize past accomplishments.** It is especially important to do this when the change realigns the structure of the organization or results in downsizing, breaking up work teams that have been together for a long time. Some ways to honor the past include:

- ✓ Hold a celebration – a luncheon or dinner, a party during work hours, or an off-site gathering – to reminisce about the past organization.  
Assemble a memory book of symbolic photos and show it at a good-bye ceremony.

- Plant a tree or put up a plaque in honor of the “old” group.
- Have symbolic burials of old manuals or procedures.
- Create and display a timeline for the organization on which employees can post photographs, write their memories, and sign their names at points significant to them.
- ✓ Encourage people to take a piece of the past with them. This may be a photo of the former work group or building, a paper weight with a logo, or something else that is meaningful.
- ✓ Hand out awards or letters of commendation for past work to those whose jobs are changing or being moved.

### **Rationalizations for Not Communicating**

William Bridges records these rationalizations for not communicating:

- “They don’t need to know yet. We’ll tell them when the time comes.” For every week of upset that you avoid by hiding the truth, you gain a month of bitterness and mistrust. Better to let them know what’s coming and get them engaged in help with the plan.
- “They already know. We announced it.” Whatever you announced didn’t sink in. Threatening information is absorbed remarkably slowly. People need to ask questions and hear answers, in different ways, to understand what it means. Keep the conversation going.
- “I told the supervisors. It’s their job to tell the employees.” The supervisors are likely to be in transition themselves and they may not even sufficiently understand the information to convey it accurately. You cannot assume information is “trickling down” – you have to engineer it.
- “There’s no point in saying anything until everything has been decided.” Meanwhile, the rumor mill is running on overtime, and people are getting more scared, confused, and resentful. Tell people what you know, at the point you know it, and keep updating them. And if you don’t know, tell them when you will.

Adapted from Bridges’ Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change, Addison-Wesley, 1991.

### **Communication Methods and Media**

Change leaders are often unsure about:

- What to communicate when,
- Who should communicate what to whom, and
- How to communicate most efficiently.

Wise strategies for communicating about change are to:

Communicate everything you know at the moment you are communicating.

If there is a problem that the change is designed to fix, this picture needs to be painted. If the problem is simply a budget cut, and outside your control, this is important to share. People will also be anxious to know the details of how the change will be carried out – “the devil is in the details,” many have learned. This is where change leaders often need help. Summarized below are tips for communicating about the change.

- Groom lots of people to help communicate, at different levels and in different parts of the organization.

Change leaders sometimes make the mistake of thinking they are the only ones who can and should communicate about the change. Communicating about change is a big, long-term

job, and must be shared among many people. This responsibility can be handled by everyone who has been involved in creating the vision, designing the future state, and planning for implementation..

Ideally, there are a few key messages agreed upon so that everyone is communicating them consistently. Other than those key messages, everyone is encouraged to develop their own ways to communicate the change. It is helpful to prepare people with a workshop on effective communication of difficult messages. This workshop should include plenty of time for individuals to get answers to their own lingering questions and practice responding to a variety of challenges.

- Communicate through many methods – but pay special attention to behavior.

Your credibility depends on your behavior. The more consistent your words and actions are, the more people will trust what you say, and the more willing they will be to follow and assist you in implementing change.

Keep in mind that there is a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the way managers treat their employees and the way employees treat customers.

Face-to-face dialogue is the richest communication method. Leaders find that because of their positions, they have information and a perspective that others do not have, and this helps “sell” the change. They also find that as they discuss the change, people help them develop better examples and discover even more compelling language to use.

However, the job is too big to be accomplished through individual conversations alone. Numerous communication media exist in the workplace. Use as many as appropriate, particularly those that promote two-way communication during the transition process:

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|--------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ Newsletters      | ✓ Brown bag lunches    |
| ✓ E-mail           | ✓ Letters to employees |
| ✓ Team meetings    | ✓ Information seminars |
| ✓ Town halls       | ✓ Training sessions    |
| ✓ Bulletin boards  | ✓ Posters              |
| ✓ Q and A sessions | ✓ Retreats             |

### **Demonstrating Compassion**

When responding to negative reactions to change...

#### **DO:**

- Listen first, then engage the person in conversation about what you know that may help, and how they can help themselves.
- Allow tears; keep a box of tissues handy. You do not need to let it go on for long. Gently guide the person into thinking about how to manage their stress and offer any opportunities you can for active involvement in planning.
- Say things like:

“I’m sorry this has to happen” – this is an honest expression of sympathy, without inappropriate acceptance of responsibility. Anything you can offer to balance losses will be appreciated.

"I'm not sure how everything is going to be done. Will you help figure it out?" – it is trust-building to acknowledge what you don't know, and brilliant to involve everyone in figuring out the answers. However, individual efforts must be coordinated, so don't just send everyone off on independent missions without management.

#### **DON'T:**

- Ignore it and walk away. You will lose any hope of support.
- Put up with name-calling or disrespectful treatment. Firmly stop the person and ask them to cool down and come talk with you when they are calmer.
- Go over and over the same issues with the same person – you cannot necessarily help everyone get unstuck. When approached for about the third time, observe that you have had this conversation before, and ask if there is someone else the person needs to talk with to get answers to questions.
- Say things like:

"Trust me, it will all be OK" – people know better.

"Stop complaining" or "No more whining" – people's feelings cannot be shut down.

"Just grow up and deal with it" – the parent-child approach may produce silence in the moment, but can backfire by inspiring hostility or passive behavior. Better to walk away and allow time to cool off.

#### **Turn Resistance Into a Useful Force**

In his book on resistance to change, Rick Maurer describes an analogy that captures the importance of addressing resistance by embracing it:

Those who have run rapids in rafts, kayaks, or canoes know that when their craft is headed broadside toward a large rock, the best move is to lean downstream, toward the rock. Leaning into the rock exposes more of the bottom of the boat to the downstream current, giving you time to maneuver. Leaning away from the rock tilts you upstream, allowing the current to catch the edge of the boat and flip it over.

Source: Beyond the Wall of Resistance: Unconventional Strategies That Build Support for Change.

Just as leaning toward the rock goes against your natural instinct, addressing resistance may not seem like the logical thing to do. However, resistance to change can be used to the organization's advantage.

Resistance forces the organization to:

- Clarify the purpose, process, and expected outcomes of the change.
- Gather important information and evaluate key issues, which can result in more careful analysis and planning.

Resisters who are "won over" often become the strongest advocates for the change.